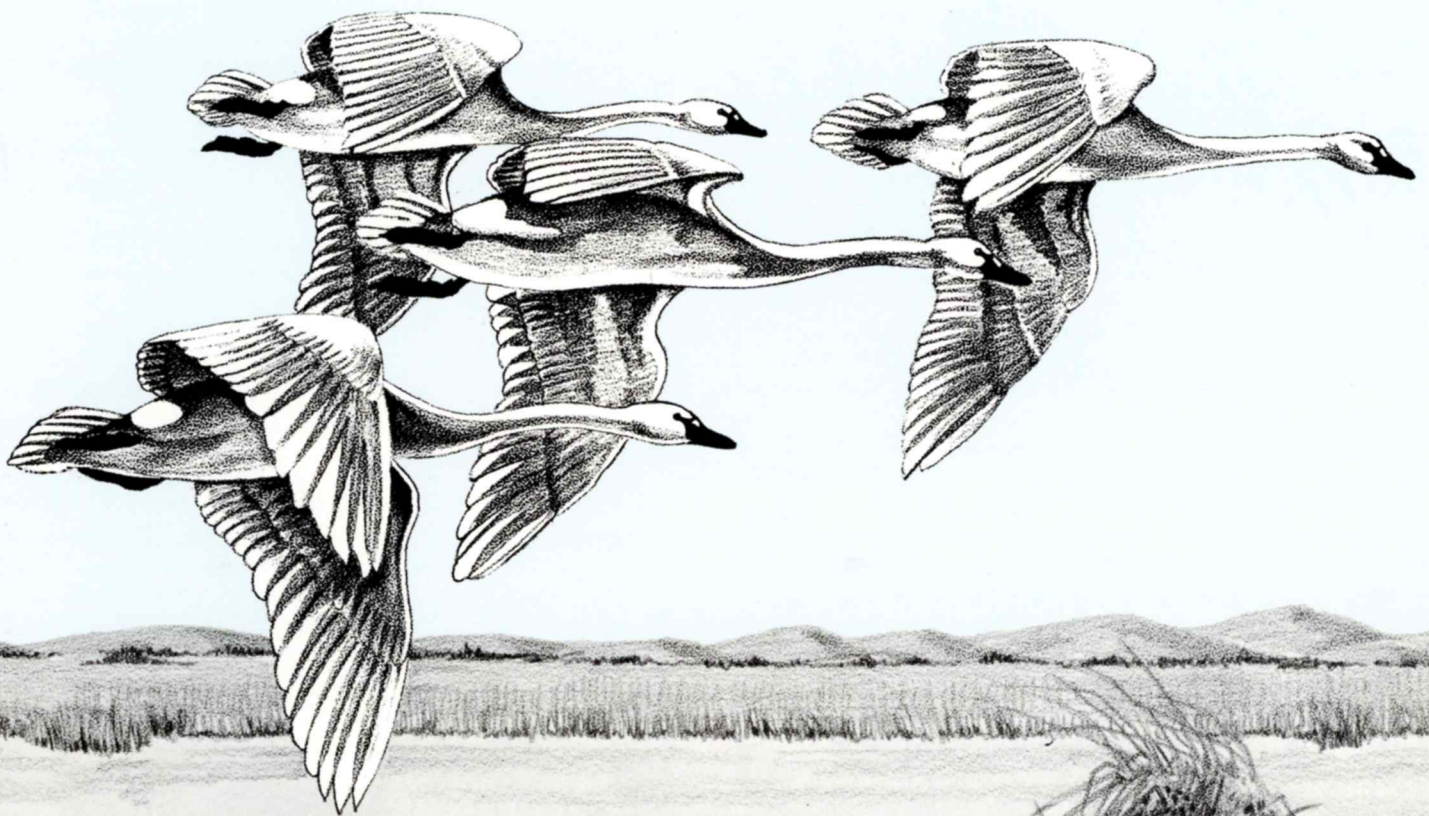
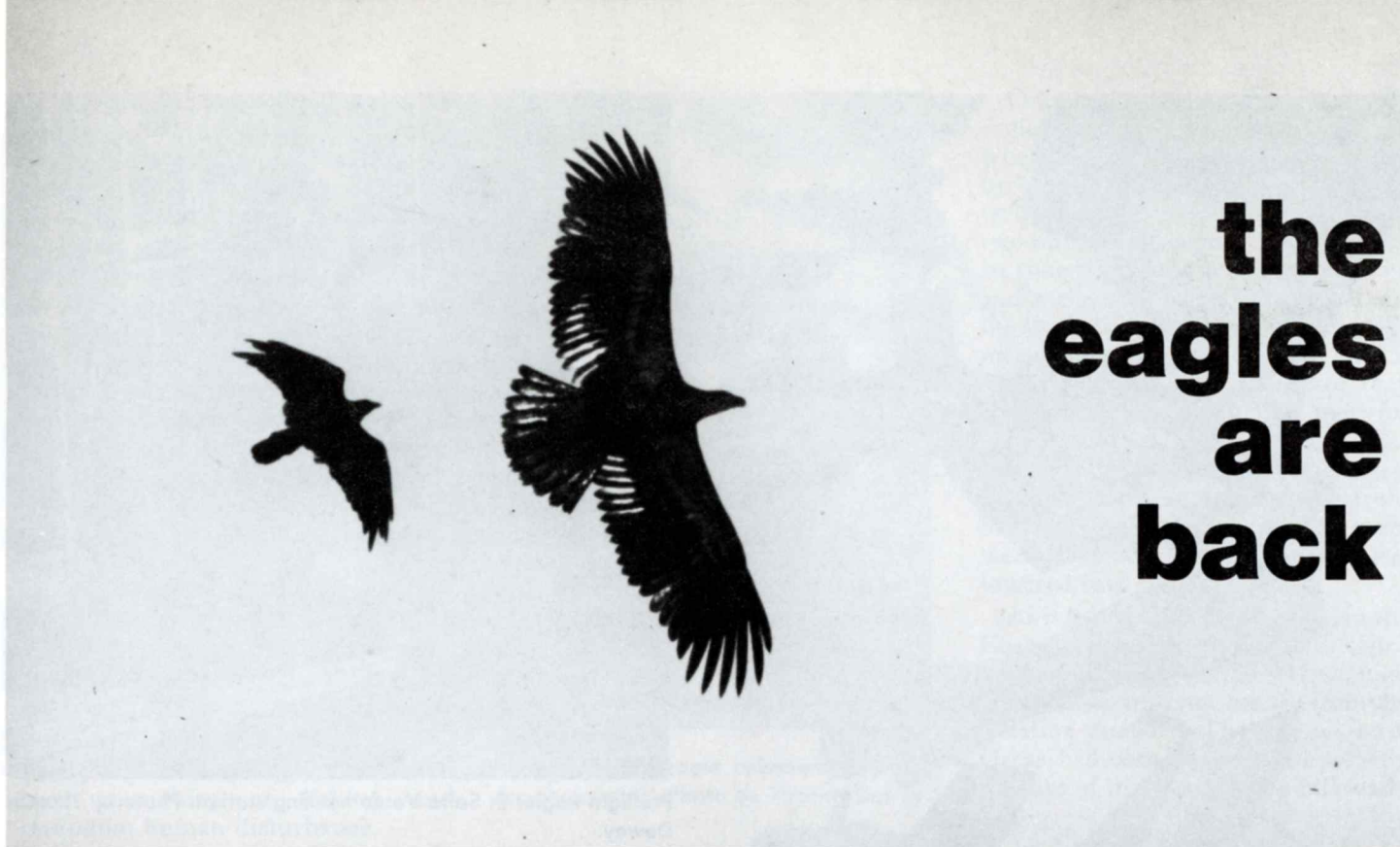


OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 1980





the eagles are back

Bald eagle and raven in aerial combat over Santa Catalina Island.
Photo by Richard Callas.

By Ralph L. Young

-- the bald eagles return to Catalina

Dave Garcelon's newly imprinted T-shirt tells it all: "The eagles are back!"

Just yesterday, the bald eagle was a dimly remembered page from the history of Santa Catalina Island. Today, five young bald eagles are soaring through the blue skies over the island for the first time in many years.

And one errant young eagle has made its way to the mainland and disappeared.

The Catalina flights mark the first stage of what Garcelon, a 26-year-old senior from Humboldt State University, Arcata, hopes will be the successful reintroduction of bald eagles in the Channel Islands, where they have not been known to breed since 1949.

No one is more surprised at the sudden reappearance of eagles than the island's ravens. They had grown accustomed to ruling the roost, but now it's daily aerial combat—first a sortie by the ravens, then a retreat in wild disorder as the eagles fly pursuit.

The eagles were nestlings only a few weeks old when they were flown to Catalina Island in mid-June. They had been taken by Garcelon from nests in the San Juan Islands of the State of Washington, which has the largest bald eagle population in the contiguous 48 states.

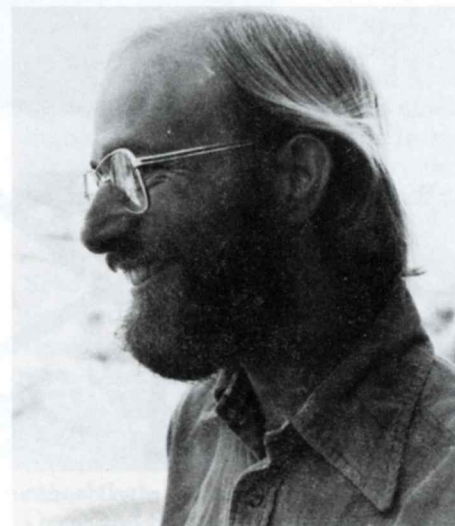
(Volunteers sighted 12,199 bald eagles, some 3,000 more than in 1979, during the National Wildlife Federation's second annual mid-winter survey in January 1980. Of those 1,623 sightings were in Washington.)

When Garcelon collected the birds in early June, he took them only from nests containing siblings, being careful to take the largest bird from one nest, the smallest bird from the next. This was an attempt to obtain sexual balance for later propagation.

"With birds of prey the female is normally larger than the male," he explains.

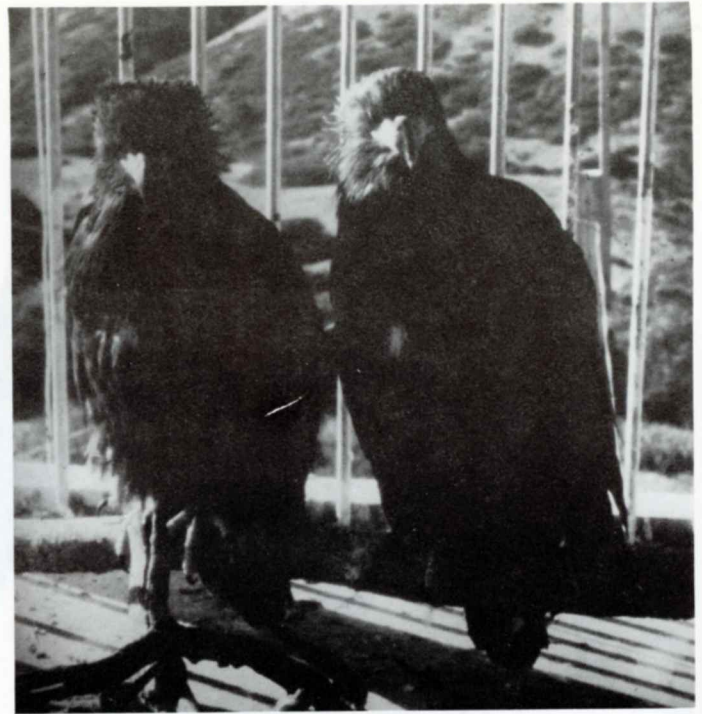
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David Garcelon
heads
eagle project.
DFG photo
by the author.





Thomas Dewey records data on caged eagles at Salta Verde. DFG photo by John Mackenzie.



Preflight eagles in Salta Verde hacking station. Photo by Thomas Dewey.



Salta Verde hacking station after departure of eagles. Photo by Thomas Dewey.

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Officials from the Washington Department of Game assisted in the captures.

The attempt to re-establish the bald eagle—an endangered species on the Channel Islands off Southern California—is a project of the Institute for Wildlife Studies, Arcata, of which Garcelon is president. The project has the approval of both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game, which has contributed funds from the department's Nongame Conservation Program.

Thus far, however, Garcelon's major support has come from a private donor and the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, which has also provided transportation, field assistance and protected locations for hacking stations—elevated enclosed platforms on which the eaglets were kept until ready to fly.

Garcelon says the eagle project is long-range, and that he plans to bring juvenile birds to the island for several years in the effort to re-establish a resident population.

"That is, if the birds are available," he says, adding that rehabilitation centers—perhaps one in California—may be future sources of eagle chicks.

Garcelon says that because of the high mortality of bald eagles during their first few years, it may require several years of effort and many bald eagle chicks to assure success. But he is more optimistic than ever now that the first young eagles brought to the islands have survived and are thriving.

"The first four months were a critical period," he says. Ron Jurek of Sacramento, a DFG specialist in endangered species, echoes Garcelon's optimism.

"At least 25 pairs of bald eagles are known to have nested on the Channel Island during a single season in the past, but the last verified nesting success occurred in 1949. Egg collecting, pesticide, and shooting at times for the purpose of livestock protection probably accounted for their demise," Jurek said, "but these factors no longer exist to the extent they did in the past."

Jurek said the islands have suitable nest sites for bald eagles in trees and coastal cliffs.

"It's quite different than the mainland because of the lack of ground predators," he said. He also noted the ready availability of a plentiful food supply—fish, birds and carrion.

Protection may be the key to the eagles' survival. Catalina and the other seven Channel Islands are, for the most part, controlled by conservation groups or public agencies that assure continuity of habitat and minimum human disturbance.

Another reason for DFG confidence in the reintroduction project is Garcelon himself. In a recent letter of recommendation, Eldridge G. "Red" Hunt, Wildlife Management Branch chief, said the project had the "wholehearted support of the department."

"Over the past several years he (Garcelon) has developed rehabilitation and release techniques needed for reintroducing bald eagles to former habitats . . . we are confident that Mr. Garcelon has the knowledge, ability and determination to carry out this long-range program for the restoration of bald eagles to the Channel Islands."

Project Eagle has been a day and night operation since Garcelon arrived on the island with six eaglets on a rather inauspicious date, Friday, June 13. So far, however, most of his luck has been good.

The eagle chicks were paired off and placed in three hacking stations that had been built at remote island locations in habitat known to be favored by bald eagles. The stations were enclosed platforms raised 15 to 18 feet above the ground on long stilts or poles. Elaborate precautions were taken to avoid human contact and make sure the young eagles were not disturbed during the short period before they fledged.



Immature bald eagle unknowingly poses for photograph. Photo by Thomas Dewey.

Eagles grow very quickly during the first few weeks, from a tiny chick to a 10-pound bird with a 6-foot wingspread in 11 weeks. By the time they are 12 weeks old they are ready to fly.

Garcelon and his aides, two students from Humboldt State, Richard Callas and Thomas Dewey, and Gary McCurdy, another volunteer, kept careful watch on the hacking stations to make sure the birds were fed a daily diet of fish, goat meat and ground squirrels. But they did so unobserved.

One-way glass partitioned the enclosed platform to enable the naturalists to approach the birds without being seen. Carpeting on the ladder to the platform muffled their steps.

Progress of the birds was observed continually by means of television cameras placed on tall poles about 18 feet in front of each platform. Monitors were set up in tents at observation posts some distance away. All information was recorded.

The eaglets grew fast. By the time they had reached 12 weeks in mid-July, all but one, which had lost some tail feathers, were ready to fly. As the fledgling stage approached, wax sheaths that had coated the feathers disappeared and the birds began to lose their down.

One more step remained before the eagles flew. In the dead of the night, when the eagles would be least disturbed, Garcelon and his aides attached tiny radio transmitters—about two ounces in weight, to their backs. In time the straps would deteriorate and the transmitters fall off but for the immediate future they would be a means of tracking the birds to help in case of trouble, to make sure they were fed if unable to find food for themselves.

The night before two pairs of eagles was thought ready to fly, the front bars of the cage that contained them were lowered and a flying platform lowered into place.

As it happened, the first bird to fly, Chator, was alone in what was called the Sweetwater hacking station, high on a remote hill, not too far from the Catalina Airport. The second bird, Orcas, had been removed temporarily because of the loss of some tail feathers.

At 5:42 a.m. Thursday, July 17, with Garcelon and Callas watching from a blind, Chator rose into the morning air and took his first flight. It was 2:23 p.m., however, before Garcelon could report the event by radio to his aides at the other two hacking stations.

"He rose up, directly up into the air, just without moving his wings and then moved off the platform and flew about 200 yards before landing in the top of a bush," Garcelon reported elatedly.

"We couldn't get out of the blind until the bird was out of sight," he said, explaining the long delay between the event and his report.

The radio report continued: "He has made nine flights so far and is doing really good. The ravens and mockingbirds gave him a bad time in the morning, but he's flying around, landing and playing with buffalo chips."

Several days later, Chiquita and Seko flew from the Salta Verde hacking station and Susha and Chumash flew from the station at Bulrush Canyon. Later Orcas took flight.

The birds' names were not attempts to make pets of the eagles but rather a means of referring to them other than by resorting to numbers. Orcas and Susha are San Juan Islands;



Young bald eagle roosts on island tree. Photo by Richard Callas.

Chator and Chumash are Channel Island Indian names; Seko is reportedly a Canadian Indian name for bird of the sea ice, and Chiquita was so-named for a crate in which for a brief time he—or she—was lodged. No one has yet determined the sex of the six eaglets; whether Garcelon was successful in picking males and females will not be known until later.

Only two mishaps have thus far marred the experiment. One bird was grounded temporarily after injuring its eye on a bush; another, Chiquita, flew the coop so to speak. In early August Chiquita was last seen flying toward the mainland coast in the vicinity of Huntington Beach, an Orange County community. Later reports placed the bird in the San Fernando Valley and Newport Beach, but there has been no confirmation of these sightings.

Garcelon said that although a juvenile, the bird is fully grown with a wingspread approaching seven feet. It has mottled black and white feathers but no white patches on its wings, such as immature golden eagles have, nor white on its head and tail as have mature bald eagles.

Garcelon is not particularly concerned about the flight to the mainland, but he would like to keep track of the bird if possible. The radio transmitter on its back has a range of

about 15 miles, and attempts will be made to find it.

In the meantime, the other five birds are fending very well for themselves on Santa Catalina Island, feeding on carrion and fish, skirmishing with ravens and mockingbirds. McCurdy has left, and Callas and Dewey recently returned somewhat reluctantly to Humboldt State after a summer they will never forget.

As of this writing (in mid-September 1980) Garcelon is ready to pack up and leave, too, but he still has unfinished business—a trip or two to the mainland in search of Chiquita, an appearance or two in an attempt to raise funds for continuance of Project Eagle. The T-shirts at \$8.50 apiece are a lighthearted but obviously inadequate step toward that goal.

Garcelon expects to return monthly to Catalina for observations. In the meantime the birds will be monitored by volunteers and personnel from the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, whose president, Douglas Probst, is an enthusiastic supporter of the project, as is, for that matter, the island's entire population.

Next June or early July, Garcelon plans to return with more birds if he can obtain them, and the year after that, and the year after than.

Will Project Eagle succeed?

Yes, if determination and dedica-

tion count, and if experience elsewhere is duplicated in California.

Bald eagle reintroductions are not new. Eagles have been kept in partial liberty successfully in New York state at the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, and more remarkable yet, two bald eagles kept in partial liberty at this site have themselves reproduced in just four years, a year or two less than normally expected.

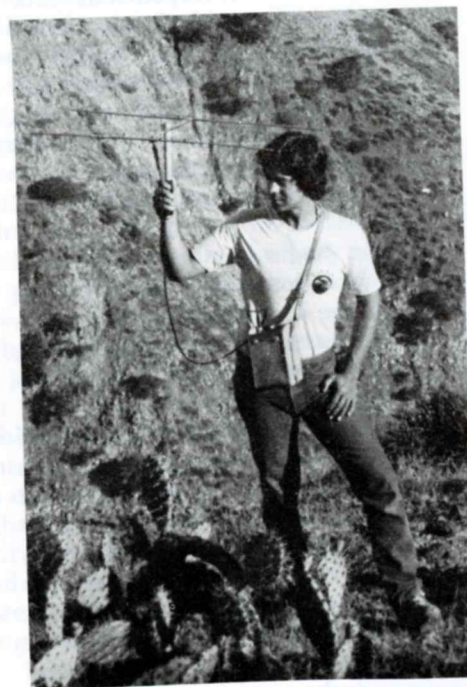
Since 1976, 15 eagles were kept at the refuge, and five more were being reared there this season.

The New York success and eagle projects elsewhere offer substantial hope of re-establishing the bald eagle—America's national bird—in Southern California. At present the farthest south the bald eagle is known to nest in the state is Lake County.

Bald eagles until now occasionally observed in the south, are migrant wintering birds usually gone by April or May. #

Author Ralph L. Young is an information officer with F&G's Region 5 and Marine Resources Region in Long Beach.

Funds to support Project Eagle may be designated for that purpose in contributions to the California Department of Fish and Game Non-game Conservation Program. #



Richard Callas monitors eagle's flight with receiver. Photo by David Garcelon.

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